



International
Labour
Organization

SAFETY
HEALTH
FOR ALL



► Safety + Health for All Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka

September 2024

Key achievements to date

Background to Plantation sector and Occupational Safety and Health

Sri Lanka is a major exporter of plantation crop products such as tea, coconut, and rubber. In 2022, tea export earnings were 1.1 billion USD. The tea sector employs over 2.5 million people, with smallholders cultivating about 60% of the total tea land and accounting for more than 70% of the total production. The 25 Sri Lanka's Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) employ over 115,000 workers in large estates, with over 1 million people living in these estates (counting dependents and people employed in other businesses). The labour force in the plantation sector is decreasing significantly. In the past 5 years, nearly 50,000 workers left the industry, and it is predicted to continue in coming years as the sector does not attract the youth. Creating a safer and healthier working environment, and dignified job creation/classification with modern agro-technological integration is thus essential for the sustainability of this industry.

Workers in plantations face great risks of occupational injuries and diseases. Risks include unguarded machinery and exposure to dust in factories as well as exposure to fertilizers, pesticides, and other agrochemicals in the plantations. Accidents also occur due to working on difficult, uneven terrains under challenging weather conditions. Additionally, workers suffer injuries from insects (including wasps) and leech bites, as well as cuts from tools. Little is known regarding work-related diseases but a small percentage of workers interviewed by the project reported issues such as back pain, joint pain, respiratory issues, and chronic cough. Regarding public

health, malnutrition is key concern, together with alcohol consumption. Women in the plantation sector are particularly vulnerable to various forms of workplace harassment, including sexual harassment and discrimination.

Labour inspection visits focusing on occupational safety and health (OSH) are rarely conducted in the tea, rubber, and coconut smallholder subsector unless complaints are lodged with the Labour Office. Furthermore, limited knowledge and understanding of OSH among Labour officers present additional challenges. Climate change also is a key issue in plantations, where workers are exposed to bad weather conditions as well as extremely hot temperatures which can create heat stress. Heat stress can immediately impact workers on the job, leading to illnesses such as heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and even death. In the longer term, workers can develop serious and debilitating chronic diseases, impacting the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, as well as the kidneys.

Absence of an active social dialogue mechanism between workers and management in the plantation sector is further escalating the problems. Traditional management styles and people management systems are creating greater challenges towards the industry as the youth are not attracted to this industry. Plantation wages are also a key element that adds to the tension. The daily wage model has long been criticised for its inherent instability and its failure to provide workers with a living wage. The adoption of a new wage model, which is linked to productivity and technology could allow workers to earn more and enhance the living standards and competencies, while supporting companies to achieve expected productivity.

Workers' dignity, recognition of their contributions, and involvement in workers' ideas/engagement to improve workplace practices will enable the creation of an impactful and resilient sector. Further, flexible work arrangements, and safeguarding social security will create an environment that would attract youth to this industry.

► The ILO response

The ILO focuses on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) as an entry point where there is a shared interest between workers and employers. OSH dimensions cover both physical and psychosocial risks that affect workers and can trigger workplace changes that will improve various aspects of workers' lives.



OSH committee members

The ILO's main objective is to create a conducive policy environment at national level together with an effective social dialogue platform at the field level, where management and workers can collaboratively discuss various issues. Once established, bipartite OSH committees can address multiple matters and develop impactful solutions, fostering a sustainable journey for both management and workers. Going forward, when these platforms reach maturity, they can be upscaled to regional or sectoral levels, to discuss critical problems proactively.

► Project partners

- The Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment
- Plantation Human Development Trust (PHDT)
- National Institute of Plantation Management (NIPM)
- The Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC)
- Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)
- Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU)
- National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOOSH)
- National Enterprise Development Authority

► Results

Strengthening the knowledge base

- **NIOSH Diagnostics Study** – Diagnostic studies focusing on OSH, discrimination and freedom of association and collective bargaining in the tea, rubber and coconut sectors were drafted and are currently being finalized for publication. Most recommendations were adopted for designing work plans with Project Partners and developing tools and programme structures.
- **“Ergonomics and Time Motion Study”** – The EFC is conducting this study for the first time in the industry to identify and address ergonomic hazards in specific tasks and operations (for selected 10 most vulnerable designations). The study findings will seek to develop solutions that can help decrease fatigue and injuries, along with increasing comfort, productivity, job satisfaction and safety of the workers.

Supporting the development of a conducive policy environment

- **Tripartite National Steering Committee:** The Secretary to the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment appointed a steering committee to review the National OSH Policy, originally formulated in 2014 and the national OSH profile & national OSH programme. The tripartite committee convened four times and drafted the revised OSH Policy following the National Guideline (Guideline for National Policies formulated by the National Planning Department). After the validation workshop with the tripartite constituents, the final OSH policy and OSH programme were submitted to the cabinet for approval.
- **Ratification Campaign of Fundamental ILO Conventions on OSH and the Violence and Harassment Convention (C155, C187 & C190):** A signature campaign for the ratification of ILO OSH conventions C155 and C187 was launched during the Capacity Building Workshop for Incident Reporting in Kotagala in February 2024. A total of **10,850 field-level estate workers** (2,565 males and 8,325 females) signed the request letter. This will be handed over to the upcoming President after the presidential election.



Building the capacity of state institutions

- **Curriculum Development:** The ILO is collaborating with the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the National Institute of Plantation Management (NIPM) to develop a national curriculum and new OSH programmes focused on the plantation sector.
- **Automated AI OSH Support System:** The ILO is working with NIOSH to establish an AI-based chat support system linked to Facebook, providing technical and legal clarifications as well as general OSH queries for the public.
- **Capacity building of the tripartite constituents in ILO Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development (WIND) / Work Improvement in Small Enterprises (WISE):** All the project partners conducted field-level and institutional-level cascading programmes using this methodology.

- ▶ **Capacity building of the labour inspectorate:** A participatory assessment of the labour inspectorate was conducted with the ILO and shared with the Commissioner General of Labour (CGL). Following CGL's direction, a three-day residential labour inspection capacity building programme was conducted by the ILO in October 2023 for 58 Labour Officers and Assistant Commissioners of Labour (ACL). A second programme for the year 2024 will be conducted on 9-11th October 2024 in Kandy.

Strengthening social dialogue & related supporting mechanisms at the estate level

- ▶ **National Guidelines on Bipartite OSH Committees at the Workplace:** The Department of Labour, with technical support from the ILO¹, established national guidelines for bipartite OSH committees. These guidelines are key tools that enable workplace-level bipartite OSH committees.
- ▶ **Setting bipartite OSH committees at the Estate Level:** The ILO works with plantation sector partners to form Bipartite OSH Committees at the estate level. These committees consist of both workers and management representatives who jointly discuss and address OSH issues at the estate. Regular joint walkthroughs with management and worker representatives, regular meetings, documentation, and communication across the workforce are key components that the ILO advocates at the functional level. The set up of these committees is coupled with a capacity building Programme covering both OSH technical skills and soft skills (e.g., communication, negotiation, documentation) that enable members to function effectively and implement advocacy Programmes. These programmes target senior and middle management to create an enabling environment for effective social dialogue mechanisms, especially focusing on OSH committee formation at workplaces. By September 2024, **162 OSH committees were established/strengthened.**
- ▶ The capacity building programme also integrated the use of the **WIND (Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development)** and **WISE (Work Improvement in Small Enterprises)** methodologies: These tools are used at the workplace level to enable a joint approach to identifying issues and challenges. They help create home-grown, low-cost/no-cost solutions for immediate improvements based on locally sustainable measures and materials, as well as plan and implement strategic changes in the workplace. Over **700 low-cost or no-cost changes/initiatives** have been reported from the Badulla, Awissawella, Nuwara Eliya and Galle regions, covering **162 OSH committees**, with 100 additional committees in plantations in these regions.



¹ These Guidelines were developed with the support of the Better Work programme.

▶ **Tea Smallholders Sub-Committee on Occupational Safety and Health:** The ILO is advocating with 29 tea smallholder associations, representing over 3,000 smallholders, to form OSH subcommittees within their executive committees. Training support in this regard has already been extended to the executive committees of these associations.

▶ **Structured Incident Reporting Platform:** The ILO is working with two key trade unions, CWC and LJEWU, to establish a structured incident reporting platform at the trade union level. Estate-level representatives are trained in incident reporting, allowing trade unions to lobby the government and Regional Plantation Companies using statistical and evidence-based approaches.



As of September 2024, 11,930 workers (including 8,939 women) benefitted from project interventions.

Contact us

ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives
United Nations Compound
202-204 Bauddhaloka Mawatha,
Colombo 7
Sri Lanka

T: +94 112 592 525
E: colombo@ilo.org

WEB : www.ilo.org/sri-lanka